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CONSCIENCE:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.

By WILLIAM GIBSON, M.A.
OF
PEMBROKE HALL, CAMBRIDGE.

C A M B R I D G E,

Printed by J. ARCHDEACON Printer to the UNIVERSITY;
For J. WOODYER, in Cambridge; and sold by J. BEECROFT, Paternoster-Row,
J. DODSLEY, Pall-Mall, and T. CADELL, the Strand, in London;
D. PRINCE, at Oxford; and W. CHASE, at Norwich.

M. DCC. LXXII.

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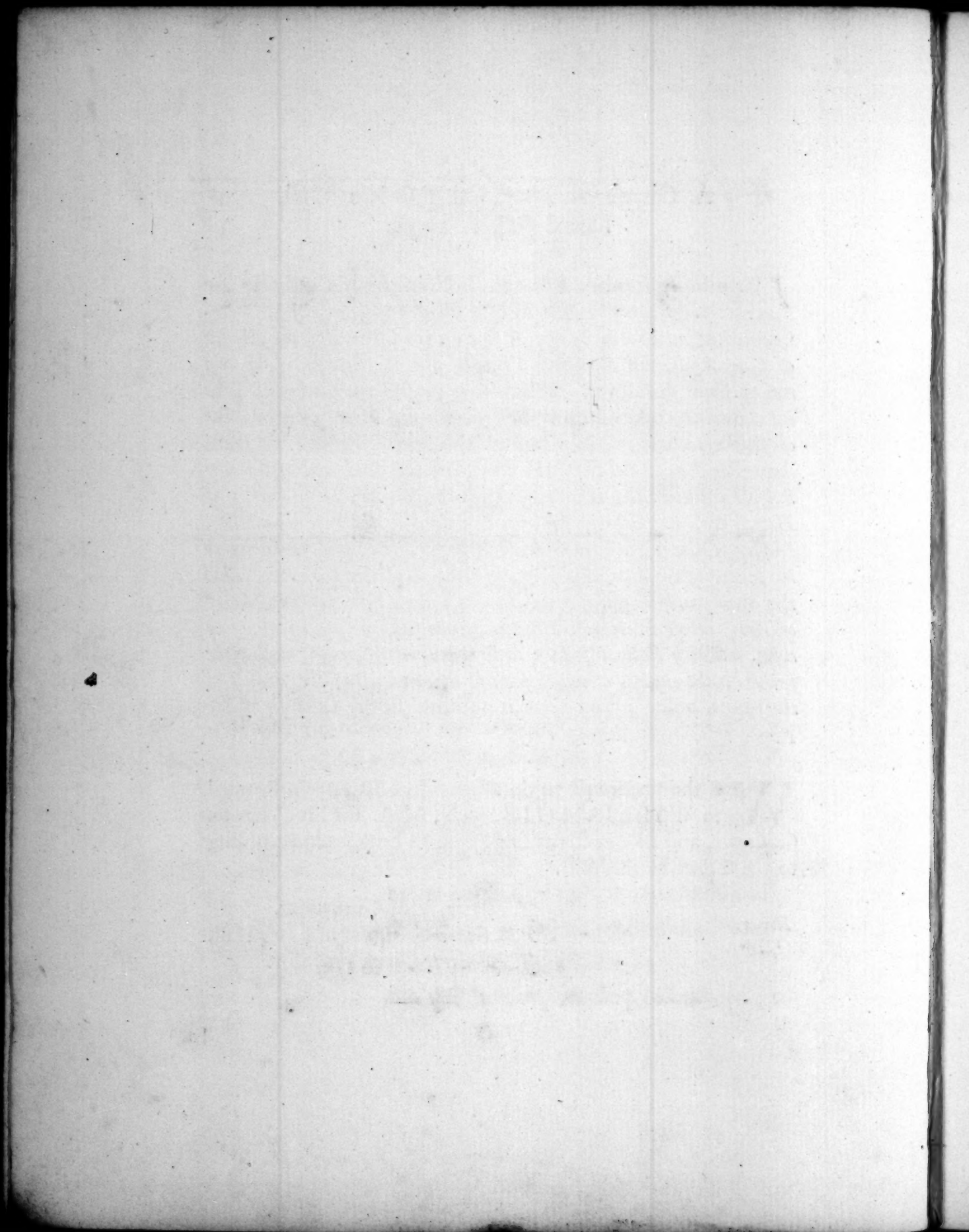
A Clause of Mr. SEATON's Will,
Dated OCT. 8. 1738.

I Give my Kislisbury Estate to the University of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which shall be disposed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor for the time being, or any two of them shall agree. Which three persons aforesaid shall give out a Subject, which Subject shall for the first Year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding Years, till the Subject is exhausted; and afterwards the Subject shall be either Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Master of Clare Hall, and Greek Professor, to be most conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and recommendation of Virtue. And they shall yearly dispose of the Rent of the above Estate to that Master of Arts, whose Poem on the Subject given shall be best approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in English, and to be printed; the expence of which shall be deducted out of the product of the Estate, and the residue given as a reward for the Composer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verses.

WE the underwritten do assign Mr. SEATON's Reward to WILLIAM GIBSON, M.A. for his Poem on *Conscience*, and do direct the said Poem to be printed according to the Tenor of the Will.

Nov. 2,
1772.

J. Brown, Vice-Chancellor.
P. S. Goddard, Master of Clare Hall.
J. Lambert, Greek Professor.



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C O N S C I E N C E :

A

P O E T I C A L E S S A Y .

SILENCE, to thee, best nurse of serious thought!
From Courts, from Camps, and busy Faction's din,
From Trade's throng'd walks, and Pleasure's gay parade
Thy Vot'rist gladly turns. — O! thither lead,
Where far sequester'd from the frequent haunts
Of men, thou lov'st in secret cell to live
With Solitude thy sister: there with you,
All absent else, along the pathless wood
Oft let me devious range; or by the brink
Of some lone fountain laid, from morn to eve,
In Meditation pass the peaceful day —

A

In

In Meditation, such as to the Mind
 Opes her own stores exhaustless; and unfolds
 Pow'rs so distinct, so wonderful, and vast,
 As loudly speak her origin divine.
 But chiefly on thy mystic properties,
 CONSCIENCE! in solemn musing let me sit,
 Till the flame kindle in my raptur'd breast,
 And from my tongue unwonted numbers glide.

NOR in such hour, thou watchful Sentinel!
 Unseen of mortal eye that stand'st aloof
 Lift'ning the busy Mind, attentive still
 To all her various workings, and on leaves
 Firmer than flint, with silent stroke and deep,
 Graving each secret thought: Nor in such hour,
 With the dread outcry of remember'd Ill,
 Disturb the flowing strain; for Thee which flows
 In artless measures, haply such as these —

PAST was the reign of Chaos, and of Night;
 The groves of Eden bloom'd; and Man arose
 Lord of the rich Domain — of form erect,
 Comely, majestic; and with Passions fraught
 Warning to shun, or prompting to pursue

The

The painful, or the pleasing. High o'er these,
 A band rebellious, Reason sat supreme,
 Skill'd to collect, arrange, compare, combine
 Ideas, as they rise; and thence infer
 The fitness, or the turpitude of things.

YET left too pow'rful Passions should propel
 Headlong to acts immoral, nor allow
 Time for slow Reason to deduce a rule
 To curb their mad career; CONSCIENCE kind Heav'n
 Appointed her assistant; CONSCIENCE quick
 To heed the call of Duty, to discern
 'Twixt right and wrong, and bias to the best.

ON Man, to such a Monitor consign'd,
 How first advanc'd Iniquity? how first
 Stole in Corruption? slept the Sentry then,
 To whom his God had left him? Ah! not so
 She fail'd her mighty trust; but wide awake,
 And thrill'd with horror for an act, might plunge
 Each unborn Age in everlasting woe,
 Ev'n when his trembling hand was stretch'd to take
 The fair forbidden fruit, desist, She cried,
 Desist, and sin not! speechless he and pale

Awhile stood falt'ring, till by Eve beguil'd,
 Rebel to CONSCIENCE he did take and eat.

THERE perish'd Innocence; an injury there
 CONSCIENCE sustain'd of dire event to Man!
 Weaken'd she rose, and feebler from her fall
 With feebler efforts from the human heart
 Repell'd insurgent Vice; till by degrees
 Her voice was scarcely heard; till Abel's blood
 Cried from the ground, and God condemn'd the world.
 Since when, with seeming unconcern, she oft
 Sees her prime laws infring'd; and oft observes
 Reason's frail bark by boist'rous Passions driv'n
 Far from its course, nor bids the storm be still.

YE! who abstracted from such common cares
 As catch the Vulgar: Ye! who leave alike
 Folly's fantastic train, and Comus' crew
 Unwisely mirthful, to their midnight glees,
 By the pale lamp to ply your studious toil
 In some lone chamber, till the shrilling cock
 Warn of approaching day, ye best can tell,
 Vers'd in the hoary registers of Time,
 Each ancient ill invading hence the world.

Not

Not Israel's race, the chosen charge of heav'n;
 Nor Aaron's self their leader, and their priest;
 Nor Jesse's Son, whom God approv'd, and took
 From tending on the waste the teeming ewes
 To rule his own elect, untainted 'scap'd.

IF, CONSCIENCE! quickly from thy ruins rose
 Evils like these, o'er-shadowing ev'ry plant
 Pleasing to heav'n, or good for mortal man;
 And in an age too when the Will divine
 By Prophets oft, and oft by Signs was shewn:
 Less wonder if, such warnings heard no more,
 Succeeding ages deeper sunk in sin;
 Less wonder, if Philosophy in vain
 Essay'd with friendly, tho' with feeble hand,
 To raise fall'n Virtue, and restore thy sway.

O! what a list might ancient Greece, or Rome,
 Ev'n when Refinement threw her brightest rays
 Around their rival states; and Wisdom's voice
 Oft by their favour'd Sons along the banks
 Of cool Ilissus, and the green retreats
 Of Tusculum was heard, afford of names
 Odious to Virtue still — but why recur

To

To periods flown; or wake remembrance up
 Of long-forgotten guilt, when modern times
 By Heav'n's own light illum'd, and taught to aim
 At nobler ends than ancient ages knew,
 Teem with surpassing crimes; when ev'ry ill
 Which hell gave birth to, and the bad adopt,
 Thrives in our streets, and taints the passing gale.
 Lo! where regardless of her plighted vows,
 Her husband's peace, her hoary parent's pang,
 Her infant's future fame, in the broad sun
 The bold Adultress hastes to meet her shame.
 Leagu'd with Injustice, lo! where Av'rice bursts
 Through ev'ry moral tie; and grasping still
 At treasures not her own, from pole to pole
 Braves the hoarse billow, and defies the storm —
 Not Afric's fatal heats, nor scorpion brood,
 Nor howling desarts can protect her Sons
 From Rapine — See! on Guinea's glowing coasts
 She pours her greedy legions; to their woods,
 Their rocks, their caves the frightened Ethiops flee
 Swift, but in vain — thence struggling torn, behold!
 Far from their friends, their babes, their frantic wives,
 From ev'ry fond connexion of the soul,
 To dwell with Darkness in the central mine,

And

And bear the iron stripes of men more fell
 Than all the monsters of their native wilds,
 She drags them — some disdainful of her chains
 Rush resolute on death; less desp'rate some,
 Not less determin'd, scorn the proffer'd food,
 In tears dissolve, and sigh their souls away.
 See! too the Fiend, o'er Asia's wasted plains,
 Array'd in terrors, hideous stalks along —
 From Ganges' hallow'd stream with hasty stride
 Turns the scared Pilgrim, he whose pious care
 Hither his fainting dying Sire had borne
 To heave his last breath on its sacred side,
 And in its waves be wash'd of ev'ry stain —
 Whence are his fears? see! where the reeking flood,
 In crystal eddies curling once along,
 Now glows with human blood, the blood of those,
 His kindred haply, who to save the Land
 From lawless Spoilers bravely fighting fell.
 Still as he flies he casts a ling'ring look
 To Plassey's purple field, and sobbing cries —
 ' Ye Sons of Albion! madly who exchange
 ' Cool temp'rate airs for India's sultry gales
 ' In search of gold, may ev'ry ill, which gold
 ' Genders so plenteous, vex your fordid Isle —

' Fast

' Fast by your Sea-beat shores may Matrons sit,
 ' Watching those sails they ne'er shall see again;
 ' While thronging Widows, to your chalky cliffs
 ' Lament their absent Lords, on yonder plain
 ' Who glut the vulture, and manure the soil —
 ' May Luxury unnerve, and Discord tear
 ' Your weaken'd state, and Faction threat the throne,
 ' Till, no more patient of increasing crimes,
 ' Heav'n from your hands resume the regal Rod,
 ' And bid some distant Colony be Queen.'
 Nor were his vows in vain, the Pow'r who saw
 His bleeding heart, with pity saw, and said,
 ' None but thy last petition be delay'd.'

THESE, CONSCIENCE! are the crimes, and more than these,
 Which from thy fall o'er all the peopled earth,
 Flow far and wide; as o'er the Belgic plains,
 Its bound'ries broken, flows the Ocean's tide.

YET dread ye Guilty! dread the coming hour,
 When like a Lion with his noon-tide sleep
 Refresh'd, and rushing furious from his lair,
 CONSCIENCE shall rouse her; when no more content
 Silent to sit within, or whisper low

Her

Her dictates, through the soul her stern rebukes
 Loud she shall thunder, terrible, and fierce.
 Yes! as the Plund'rer with his prey returns,
 The ewe-lamb ravish'd from the poor man's breast,
 The orphan's portion, and the widow's mite,
 Thou on the way shalt meet him — meet him then,
 When least expected, and when welcome least —
 From thy upbraidings to convivial crowds,
 To dulcet measures, and enliv'ning draughts
 Of gen'rous nectar 'tis in vain he flies;
 Still shalt thou haunt him at the genial board,
 Still like the night-bird scream amid the song,
 And dash thy bitt'rest poisons in his bowl.
 Nor shalt thou fail when Darkneſs o'er the world
 Draws her dun robe; and not a ſound is heard,
 Save of the beating ſhow'r, or hollow guſt,
 That groans around the roof, then paufing ſinks,
 And groans again anon; or the due beat
 Of ſome ſlow-ſweeping Pendulum, which marks
 The momentary march of Death on man;
 Nor ſhalt thou fail with ſudden flaſh to fling
 The Ruſſian's curtains back — appall'd he ſtarts;
 And glares upon the gloom; till as the Moon
 Gleams through the ſilver crevice of a cloud,

A thousand haggard Forms, at Fancy's call,
 Rise round his bed, and sweep along the floor,
 And shew their yawning wounds, and yell their wrongs.

BUT chiefly then, when Sickness plants her thorns
 Beneath his pillow, and in tossings wild
 From side to side he seeks repose in vain;
 When the World's boasted pleasures to his view
 Grow less, and less, and less, and the tir'd Soul
 Forth-peering from her crumbling cottage spies
 Another shore of being after death,
 Then chiefly shalt thou spring to due revenge;
 Arm'd with the mem'ry of each practis'd crime,
 Or ev'n in thought projected, then alarm
 The slumb'ring legions of Remorse, urge on
 Despair's fell band, and harrow up his soul.

THEN too to vengeance horrible arous'd,
 And clad in tenfold fierceness shalt thou stand
 Beside the Atheist's bed; by his who oft
 With wit profane, and poignant blasphemy,
 And specious show of argument hath scoff'd
 Each awful truth, and ridicul'd his God. —
 Not the pale Trav'ler on the fleeting sands

Of

Of Araby, who marks the fullen shades
 Of night descend, and hears the whirlwind howl,
 And all the famish'd forest roar around,
 Feels what he feels; no nor Prometheus' self
 Raving and shiv'ring on the frosty ridge
 Of Caucasus, as fabling bards have sung,
 While vengeful Furies shake their scorpion whips
 Shrieking aloud, and gory Vultures tear
 His bleeding entrails, growing to be torn.

NOR gently, CONSCIENCE! shall thy chidings fall,
 When of omitted duties to the mind
 Thy list lies spread — in burning characters
 Where first shall stand such charitable deeds
 As never were perform'd — the hours, the days,
 The months, the years, for noblest use design'd,
 In dull inaction lost — the talents, given
 Alike to bless their owner and mankind,
 Left unemploy'd, useless alike to both.

TIMELY be wise then, Ye who careless drive
 With Passion's rapid stream; or fondly seek
 Felicity by other paths than those
 Prescrib'd by CONSCIENCE, timely then be wise!

Still

Still as alluring prospects win you on
 To faults from errors, and from faults to crimes,
 Heed well your steps, and hear her whisper'd laws —
 So ever and anon around your hearts
 Such joys serene shall spring, and pleasures play,
 As for the gold, and glist'ring gems of Ind,
 Grandeur's rich robe, the unfading wreath of Fame,
 Or boundless Empire, were unwisely sold —
 So through a world, where many a net is spread
 For Virtue's foot, and harlot Vice awaits
 To tempt th' unwary Passenger astray,
 Still shall ye safely pass — so unappall'd,
 And smiling at the dart of Death, descend,
 By Hope attended, to the silent grave.

